

St Petersburg cruise: Taking the family to hunt the treasure of the Russian Tsars

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After a leisurely two-hour drive to Dover we climbed aboard the MSC Lirica for a two-week Treasures Of The Russian Tsars cruise.

Ahead of us - that's me, my wife, our eight-year-old son and our two daughters, aged nine and 13 - lay 12 days in six different countries, including a two-day stop in St Petersburg.

The Lirica is not the biggest of the MSC fleet but still has three restaurants, two swimming pools, a Spa Wellbeing Centre, casino, theatre, several bars and shops and even a mini-golf course.



Bright spot: The Church of the Resurrection in St Petersburg

After enjoying the sea breeze out on deck, we were famished and went to La Bussola restaurant where we were well looked after by the two Brazilian waiters - who were to take care of us for the whole cruise. They were brilliant at making shapes out of napkins and kept the children amused for hours.

Our first stop was Amsterdam. From the dock it was only a ten-minute walk into the city centre with its vibrant shops. We chose to take the children to the zoo, which was well laid-out and focused on learning in a fun way.

That night we went to the Lirica's spacious theatre to watch the evening show. It offered good variety - acrobatics, dancing, magic, singing, opera, miming and an amazing pickpocket act which I was very impressed with.

Life on board was far from boring with constant activities organised by the entertainment team. When we needed quiet time there were plenty of rooms and areas where we could relax with a good book.

Day three was Bremerhaven, at the mouth of the river Weser. The town centre was a taxi ride away and there was a sandy beach and plenty of shops.

Cruising through the night brought another day and with it another country, this time Sweden and the ancient city of Gothenburg.

Unfortunately we had only three hours ashore before we had to be back on board the ship - not enough time to enjoy this beautiful and lively city.

On board we enjoyed meeting other families and, with junior and teen clubs, MSC had activities organised to keep children of all ages amused.



Family fun: The cruise ship and the excursions kept both children and parents entertained

On day five we were at sea all day and, in glorious sunshine, we set up camp by the pool.

Halfway point of the cruise was the beautiful port of Tallinn, capital of Estonia. The well preserved old city was by far the loveliest location we visited and certainly one we would like to visit again.

Next we had two days in St Petersburg which, for many, was the high point of the cruise.

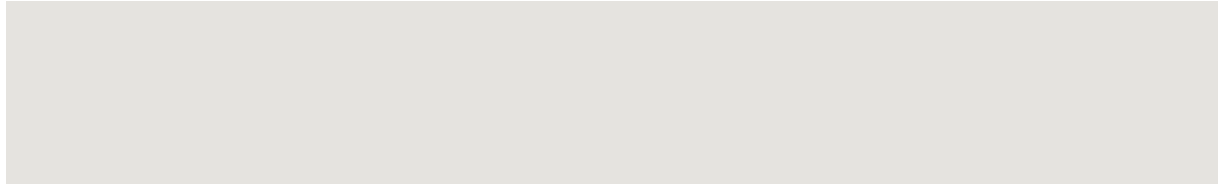
However, because of strict immigration control, the only way to leave the ship was on an organised excursion. We took tours of the city and of the fortress of Peter and Paul.

St Petersburg has an incredible history and we had a knowledgeable guide - so this proved to be a real history lesson and one that the children found very interesting.

On the second day in St Petersburg we took a canal excursion to the Yusupov Palace, once the residence of the wealthy Yusupov family and the place where Rasputin was murdered. It was an amazing tour full of opulence and grandeur.

The final stop on our cruise was at Copenhagen where, preferring to explore by ourselves, we took the local bus to the Tivoli theme park.

MSC puts the emphasis on family values. If you have not experienced one of their cruises, you are missing out on something very special - we will certainly be going again.



Travel facts

MSC Cruises offers an 11-night cruise from Dover, departing May 23, 2010, visiting Germany (Rostock), Sweden (STockholm), Finland (Helsinki), Russia (St Petersburg), Denmark (Copenhagen) and the Netherlands (Amsterdam). Prices start at £930pp. See www.msccruises.co.uk